

RICHARD E. THOMPSON

Interviewed by: Raymond Ewing

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[This interview was not edited by Mr. Thompson]

Q: This is an oral history interview with Richard E. Thompson. It's April 16, 2001. My name is Raymond Ewing. This is being conducted at the National Foreign Affairs Training Center under auspices of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. Dick, it's good to be here with you and to have this opportunity to chat a bit.

THOMPSON: Good to be here with you.

Q: Dick, you were a diplomatic courier. I wonder if you could tell me at least initially how you got interested in this line of career work. I believe you grew up in California. Were you watching a lot of movies about couriers or was there more to it than that?

THOMPSON: No, I was just interested in the Foreign Service in general. One day, when I was studying in Spain, in graduate school, I got a booklet from the Department of State and this was one of the jobs that was listed. And so on a whim, I applied for it and sent in all of the... completed that application when I returned to the States. Nothing happened, but in nine months to a year later people were going around to my neighbors asking about me and then I found out in sort of an indirect way that I'd been accepted. Then I had several interviews after that, as well and some tests, and that was basically that.

Q: So what year was that then that you started?

THOMPSON: I started to work as a diplomatic courier in 1965. But I started the process about 1963.

Q: And at the time, you said you were a graduate student. Were you going to a university in Spain?

THOMPSON: I was going to the University of Madrid. I wasn't actually a graduate student. I was taking some courses and trying to learn Spanish.

Q: Just to back up a bit. California was your home. You are a graduate of the University of Southern California.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: I think in 1960.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: And then you got interested in Spanish particularly, or were you more interested in international affairs?

THOMPSON: No, my interest was in international relations. That was my major and I also took several courses at Occidental College and at University of Southern California (USC) in Spanish, and so when I found myself, after completing the Marine Corps, with not too much to do. So I decided to go and try and perfect my Spanish by going to school in Spain.

Q: So you were in the Marine Corps right after college.

THOMPSON: No, I went to the Chamber of Commerce as a staff writer, for a year and a half. Then I found out I was either going to be drafted or I should go into the military as an officer or volunteer for six months. At the time six months sounded like the most expedient thing to so I joined the Marine Corps as a Six Month Reservist.

Q: And then you had a reserve obligation thereafter for some time.

THOMPSON: Yes, for five and a half years.

Q: Six months in the Marine Corps seems like it just barely gave you enough time for some training. Did you do anything other than...



THOMPSON: No, just the basic training. Three months of basic training, three months of advanced training.

Q: Okay. You said you were interested in the Foreign Service generally, not specifically, initially, to be a diplomatic courier. You applied only to be a courier or did you take the Foreign Service examination?

THOMPSON: No, actually I didn't actually take the Foreign Service examination until I was already an employee of the Department of State. It was almost a whimsical thing when I happened to see the... it was good luck. I just happened to see this job, and it said in the application, "Openings are infrequent" but I applied anyway. I didn't even really know exactly what the job was.

Q: Well, so, you were accepted. They did the background investigation. You came in 1965 to Washington. Did you have an initial period of training, or did you go right to work?

THOMPSON: Yes, there was about a week of training. When I went to Frankfurt, my first assignment was to Frankfurt, we had about three weeks of training, and the rest was on the job, which means that you are accompanying a senior courier on actual courier trips until they feel that you are comfortable with the situation.

Q: And your one week was probably really just orientation here in Washington.

THOMPSON: Yeah. That everyone else goes through.

Q: And then you were sent immediately to Frankfurt.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: I don't think any other Foreign Service categories get an overseas assignment quite as quickly as you did. [laughter]

THOMPSON: It's quite different now. The situation now is different. They give the new couriers five or six weeks of training here in Washington.

Q: Most of them are assigned abroad?

THOMPSON: Yes, most of them are. We have a small office in Washington and a small office in Miami now, Fort Lauderdale.

Q: Okay. But you went to Frankfurt and you had these three weeks of training there and then you began accompanying a senior courier. How long did that last?

THOMPSON: That was only for a couple of trips.

Q: By that time it was felt that you knew what you were doing and you could do it on your own?

THOMPSON: Yes. Except that in the beginning, they usually would send us to Vienna. In those days, all of the trips out of Vienna, to the Iron Curtain countries were paired trips. So, in effect, I continued to be under the supervision of a senior courier during that time because I was in effect a junior courier on these trips.

Q: And how long did these trips last? Are we talking about two weeks, maybe?

THOMPSON: The trips lasted anywhere from one day to 59 days. The longest trip I had in those days was 59 days to West Africa.

Q: Wow. Fifty-nine days. I've been in the Foreign Service for a long time and I've met lots of couriers, but I have certain perceptions of what the courier life is like. That is sort of alternation between a lot of tedium and probably a few crises. Is that a fair description?

THOMPSON: Yes, that's a fair description. It sort of alternates between a certain amount of almost boredom and extreme stress.

Q: And you have to be ready for those situations, and alert and aware of your surroundings, and so on.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: When you made these trips out of Vienna with another courier, those were mostly by air?



THOMPSON: Yes, except for the trip to Budapest, which was by train from Vienna. The rest of them were all by air on Austrian Airlines. In most cases we would go to a place and arrive late at night, overnight, leave early the next morning and come back to Vienna, and then leave that night. So we were having very long days.

Q: But you were not based in Vienna.

THOMPSON: No.

Q: They preferred to, for whatever reasons, base people in Frankfurt and then have them stage out of Vienna.

THOMPSON: That's right.

Q: Partly, the latter, because there were flights from Vienna that perhaps weren't so convenient from other places in Europe.

THOMPSON: Yes, in those days, Lufthansa didn't go into all of these countries in a manner that would be the most efficient way for them to move the material. So we used Austrian Airlines.

Q: I suppose generally, there's a preference to use American carriers if they were available, but they weren't available to Eastern Europe at that time.

THOMPSON: That's right. Our mandate was to use American carriers if they were available or if they fit... sometimes there were American carriers available but they just didn't fit the schedule. So the Department was very reasonable about this rule, the 'fly American' rule.

Q: I can see that besides the boredom and the crisis mode, you also had to be fairly flexible in terms of sleep and I suppose even eating and things like that. Your schedule, such as it was, was very demanding in the sense that what you are describing getting in late at night, leaving early in the morning and then coming back to Vienna and then leaving again that night. It sounds like it wasn't very good for sleep.

THOMPSON: That's true. But on the other hand, I liked the irregular workweek because sometime you would work 18, 20, or even 24 hours in a day, and then you would have several days off. That was one of the things I liked about the job because it wasn't a nine to five job.

Q: I suppose you would work not just five days straight but maybe ten days straight, and then you'd have a number of days off.

THOMPSON: Not normally. Usually, we would work four or five days straight, it's hard to generalize. And then we would have several days off. It all depended on the airlines. Of course there was obviously a lot more flexibility in Europe. When you got down to Africa, you just had to take what was available. Sometimes that required that you go for many days and then you would be forced to have several days off, sometimes in quite unpleasant places.

Q: Now, Frankfurt where you were initially, for four years or so...?

THOMPSON: Yes for four years.

Q: Covered not only Europe but all of Africa, most of Africa?

THOMPSON: Yes, and the Middle East.

Q: And the Middle East too. Roughly how many couriers at that time were doing that coverage?

THOMPSON: About 40 or 45.

Q: Working out of the Frankfurt office.

THOMPSON: Yes, it is and was and has always been our largest office.

Q: And it's part of the American Consulate General?

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Headed by a senior diplomatic courier.

THOMPSON: Yes.



Q: At that time when you came in, in 1965, the diplomatic courier's organizationally were not part of the Diplomatic Security Bureau as they are now. What were they part of?

THOMPSON: They were part of the Office of Communications, OC.

Q: Which also was responsible for cable communications and other...

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Pouches.

THOMPSON: Yes, they made up the pouches.

Q: Okay. How about talking about one of the longer trips. You would go into Africa, say, or the Middle East, you'd be gone for up to 59 days. Who made up that schedule? Did you make that up as a courier? Or was there a scheduling office?

THOMPSON: There was a scheduling... each area was divided and one person was given the responsibility for making up the schedules in that area. That person, we were all men in those days, made up the schedules, but they all interlocked with each other. In other words, when we had to cross the Atlantic, we were just carrying not just material for Africa, but we were carrying material for other posts, so the trips would interlock and we would pass off from one courier to another. And not just in the Frankfurt office, but throughout the world. They were all connected to each other.

Q: So you might, just as an example, go from Frankfurt to Cairo, and somebody else then would pick up at least part of the pouches from you and go on to somewhere else.

THOMPSON: That's correct. A better example is from Frankfurt to Beirut, because if someone would get on the same plane that you would get off, then you would pass off pouches to him - we were him in those days - you would pass off pouches to him and he would get on the plane and continue on. Or you might even have two or three couriers at the Beirut airport and you would all pass off to each other and each courier would get on a different plane going to a different destination.



Q: As a lay person, it seems to me that a lot of what you are describing depends on airlines meeting their schedule, being on time. From my experience, that doesn't always work. What would happen then? You'd have to scramble.

THOMPSON: Yes, and that's part of the training they gave us, in trying to figure out a way to effect a backup in case something happened. Sometimes you'd have to think very fast. You had to decide to abort the trip completely or whether to take a chance on a backup flight. Sometimes you had to make this decision while you are standing underneath the plane and you aren't privy to the latest information. So it made it very difficult. With more experience you could use your wits a little bit better. In those days it was much more difficult. Of course you always worry about someone back in the office who has an ABC book and can kind of second guess you on what flights you could have taken or what routes you could have taken. And the complaint of the traveling courier always was, "Well, you weren't there, so you don't know what it was like." And then there's the underlying idea that perhaps the courier may have made a decision based on his own personal convenience, which just outraged some of us when a suggestion was made, which wasn't made very often.

Q: I have kind of abandoned the notion that the courier was always the first person to get off the plane and the last person to get on and spent a lot of time under... next to the cargo hatch of the plane. Why don't you talk a little bit about that sort of detail, if you will, about how you would handle things at airports. And also would somebody normally from the embassy, say a post in Africa, to pick up pouches, or how did that work?

THOMPSON: You are talking about when I started...

Q: Well, let's talk about initially about this period in the 1960s.

THOMPSON: Okay. In the period of the 1960s, it's true that we had to be the first person off and okay the last person on, and for that reason we rode first class, and not only in first class but we tried to get the seat right next to the door. In those days we didn't have escorts, and in most cases we were not met by anyone from the embassy, we were met by a driver. Quite often that embassy driver wasn't under the plane but was in fact in the arrival area. So, not only did we have to get off the plane, take possession of our pouches, and move through the terminal with a series of porters, but we had to keep control of the pouches during this time and it was quite stressful because sometimes you'd have three or four porters and one of them would decide to run off in one direction and another would in the other direction, so you sort of had to keep them corralled. Later on, of course, we had escorts standing under the plane, and people from the embassies standing under the plane to make an exchange.



But in those days, we were pretty much left on our own. The same thing leaving the airport. They would pick us up at the hotel, we would go to the embassy and pick up our pouches with the driver, and we would go out to the airport and we would unload the pouches with the porters and have to go through as a regular passenger with all these pouches. And sometimes that meant standing in a series of lines, vaccination lines, the customs control, passport control, with all of these pouches and all of these porters and we were conspicuous representatives of the U.S. government at that time and it was a little bit difficult, I always managed to do it, but it was a little bit difficult to stay cool under those situations, especially in Africa.

Q: And you certainly were dealing with situations where an American government representative wasn't very popular, let alone somebody who had needs like that, porters and you know, it was conspicuous as to who you were.

THOMPSON: Yes, as a practical matter though, the porters were always happy to see us because we were always very generous with the tips. In fact they would fight, sometimes, to get to us because we were very, especially in some of the underdeveloped countries, we gave the proper tip but it was always a good tip.

Q: I assume you got reimbursed for the tips on your travel voucher.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Traveling first class, sounds pretty nice, you always got the best food, drink, and so on. I assume you weren't supposed to drink very much.

THOMPSON: No, we weren't allowed to. But, yes, that's true and I enjoyed it very much. It was one of the... but the best we get now is business class.

Q: No, first class any more.

THOMPSON: No. And by the way, whenever the plane was configured in such a way that the best way to get off the plane was tourist class, then we would fly tourist class. For example, all of these flights to Eastern Europe on Austrian Airlines were on the Caribell, so we were on the last seats of the tourist class section, because that's where the pouches were. They were loaded in the back of the plane.

Q: And there were rear exits that opened.

THOMPSON: Yes, there was a rear entrance that opened, but the pouches themselves were actually loaded inside the cabin because on the Caribell there was an area right behind the tourist class section and that's where we put the pouches, and for that reason we flew tourist class, cabin class.

Q: So, for the first four years in Frankfurt, you basically roamed all over Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Did you pretty much cover all of these countries in that period?

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: I'm tempted to ask you now, just generally, is there any place in the world you haven't been?

THOMPSON: Except for places where the United States has no recognition, I don't think there is. No, I've been everywhere.

Q: You haven't been to North Korea.

THOMPSON: No, or... well now we recognize Albania, but I hadn't been there before. No, I hadn't been to North Korea, and I hadn't been to North Vietnam until recently.

Q: And how about, well Iran, you probably were there.

THOMPSON: Yes, I was.

Q: And Libya?

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Okay. [laughter]

THOMPSON: [laughter]

Q: And we'll talk about this later, but all over South America, Cuba...



THOMPSON: Yes, I've been to Cuba. But the places where there's no recognition, of course, we didn't go there. But everywhere else I've been to.

Q: Okay.

THOMPSON: For a while there, we didn't go to certain places which were serviced by the Armed Forces Courier Service, ARFCOS. It's now called DCS, Defense Courier Service. Japan, for example, we didn't go there for many years, but we do now.

Q: I think you said something about when you were in the Frankfurt office that sometimes couriers would go across the Atlantic. Did I understand that correctly, or was that handled either by the Armed Forces couriers or by people coming out of Washington?

THOMPSON: Both. Our sister organization, the Defense Courier Service, would in those days feed us from Washington, they would bring the material over to Frankfurt, to the Rhein-Main Airbase, and would be broken down there and we would take it off on our trips. However, we would also supplement this with trips out of Dakar on Pan Am to New York and then down to Washington.

Q: So, instead of things going to West Africa or to Africa in general, often they would be taken from Washington to New York to Dakar, Senegal, and then distributed further and State Department diplomatic couriers would do that.

THOMPSON: Yes. A typical trip would be a courier would leave from Washington and fly up on a private plane to New York, and get on Pan Am to Dakar. Another courier would be waiting there in Dakar and get on the same flight and carry the material to Bissau or maybe all the way to Johannesburg.

Q: And as I recall, Pan American service in those days stopped in a number of other places, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, and so on.

THOMPSON: Yes, it would stop right down the coast all the way.

Q: So that worked out well. You connected with a courier...

THOMPSON: Yes, it was perfect for us. It worked very well for us. You call that a trunk line.



Q: A trunk line.

THOMPSON: And then a person would get off the plane, like for example in my hypothetical, in Dakar and then that person would take the material for Dakar and for some of the countries in the interior, Ouagadougou, Bamako, and so on, and would be based for maybe three or four days in Dakar and would shuttle in and out of there into these other places.

Q: Using Air France or \_\_\_\_\_.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Okay, this is a good beginning to a career as a diplomatic courier. Is there anything else we ought to talk about in terms of the initial four years in Frankfurt?

THOMPSON: Yes, for me it's very interesting that in the beginning when I first started until about 1970, the courier service was restricted to single males, under the age of 31, who had completed their military service, and were college graduates. Those were the requirements. Now, every one of those requirements has changed.

Q: There's no longer an age ceiling.

THOMPSON: There's no longer an age ceiling. Of course, we take females now. There's no education requirement. So it's completely flipped over.

Q: Dick, you served something like 32 years... how many years did you spend...

THOMPSON: Almost 33 years.

Q: Of the people who started in your period, in 1965, were you fairly unique in sticking with it for a full career or did others do so as well?

THOMPSON: I'm not unique, but there were several of us who stuck it out the whole time. Very few of us remained as traveling couriers. Most of us became managers. The people who got out of the courier service, those who have remained in the Foreign Service, have done very well. We have consuls general and many Foreign Service Officers all over the world who started out as diplomatic couriers in those days.



Q: And the way that they moved into other parts of the Foreign Service was through the written examination or was there some sort of lateral...

THOMPSON: It was a lateral movement.

Q: That was done at various times in various ways.

THOMPSON: Yes, there were always openings. As you know these things keep changing, the rules keep changing, and during the late 1960s, '67, '68, '69, there were many of my colleagues who got out of the courier service and became usually consular officers and remained so and then retired.

Q: Consular officers more than, say administrative officers, or security officers?

THOMPSON: Yes, there were a few security officers, but most of my friends became consular officers and I don't know why, but I was told that the consul general in Mexico City once said in the early '70s that he wanted as many couriers as possible to be consular officers because they weren't easily shocked. [laughter]

Q: [laughter] Nothing sufficiently dramatic to shock them. And they also knew the importance of documents and passports and visas and understood the philosophy behind them.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: That was a factor.

THOMPSON: Yes, and I suppose what he meant by that was that maybe they were a little more worldly, a little bit more streetwise than someone who came in from the outside, cold.

Q: How about the characteristic of flexibility? Was that something that was important to careers?

THOMPSON: Absolutely. You have to be able to roll with the punches. You can't get set in your ways. You have to be articulate, sometimes in a place where you don't speak the language. I found that I could use German in many places in Eastern Europe, and I could use Spanish in many places, even in Italy and Portugal. My French was nothing, so I had a difficult time, but I was able to get the idea across in places where I was alone and didn't speak the language.

Q: You carried a diplomatic passport and maybe a special courier pass of some sort?

THOMPSON: Yes, we carried what we called a courier letter, which is provided in the Vienna convention. It's a letter signed by the Secretary of State asking for free passage and making sure that our pouches are inviolate. No one ever asked for that except the Swiss.

Q: Did you have problems sometimes, particularly in this early period with officials who perhaps didn't know about the Vienna Convention or hadn't seen you before?

THOMPSON: Oh, yes. Absolutely. Not just in the early period, but throughout the career, it's still happening that you find sometimes in isolated places, and sometimes surprisingly in big cities. A customs official will ask you to open the bag and you try to explain to him what it is and he still doesn't understand. So, you either open it or put it through an X-ray machine. But we were trained on how to handle these situations and it's never happened to my knowledge that anyone has ever opened a bag.

Q: So you were insistent that bags not be opened or not X-rayed either.

THOMPSON: No. Not examined in any way.

Q: We sometimes have an image from movies and otherwise that a bag, a diplomatic pouch is maybe handcuffed to your wrist and tucked under your elbow and that's it. I assume that diplomatic pouches often are very large and you were talking about the number of porters that you had to use in some airports, talking about multiple containers, I guess.



THOMPSON: Yes, the United States' interpretation of a diplomatic pouch is very broad. Every country has a different interpretation, and ours is extremely liberal. Sometimes we have crates that weigh thousands of pounds which we put a seal on which is considered a diplomatic pouch. Some countries don't recognize this, and we've had difficulties in the past... not the couriers but the diplomats in certain countries have had difficulty persuading the local foreign offices to accept our interpretation. Some places never did accept it. For example, Dubai I think still won't accept the fact that these crates are pouches, and even the large pouches they won't accept. They will only take small ones to this day.

Q: Now, do other countries employ diplomatic couriers and use them in some way similar to what we do? Would you run into couriers from other countries sometimes on flights?

THOMPSON: Yes. Most frequently, we would run into the Queen's messengers who are the British couriers who were and are retired military officers from the British Army. We had a certain camaraderie with them. Occasionally, we would run into the French, and the Israelis. And the Russians, who traveled in Paris, all over the place, everywhere they went, not just to certain countries as we did.

Q: One of the requirements in this period in the 1960s for a State Department diplomatic courier was that they had completed their military obligation, or not be subject to the draft, I guess. How could you keep up your reserve commitment as a Marine officer?

THOMPSON: The requirement was to have completed your active military service, which I had done, and when I got the job I became an inactive in the Marines and I didn't have to go to meetings any more and four years later they sent me an honorable discharge. Some of my colleagues who were in the Army Reserve were required to go to summer camp and even to attend meetings in Europe.

Q: In Frankfurt, I suppose, there were opportunities to do that.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: After four years in Frankfurt, what happened to you then?

THOMPSON: I was transferred to Bangkok. They had just recently moved the office from Manila to Bangkok. I was the first courier actually to be assigned there. The others had all just moved up from Manila.

Q: Now the Manila then Bangkok regional office covered the rest of the world that was not covered out of Frankfurt or Washington or was there somewhere else too?

THOMPSON: No, it covered the Far East and parts of the Middle East. In those days we would connect with the Frankfurt couriers in Beirut.

Q: Oh, so you go as far as Beirut to the west, from Bangkok.

THOMPSON: We would carry the material to Beirut, the material we didn't enter into the defense courier system in Bangkok or Manila we would carry to Beirut and pass it off to the Frankfurt couriers there and they would take it to Frankfurt.

Q: How about material coming across the Pacific from Washington?

THOMPSON: In most cases, that would be transported by the Defense Courier Service to Clark Air Force Base in Manila and we would pick it up there.

Q: It wouldn't come all the way to Bangkok.

THOMPSON: No, we had to go down and get it.

Q: But this was the period beginning in 1970, and of course Vietnam was very active. You went to Saigon many times I suppose.

THOMPSON: Yes, but again, that was infrequent because they were mainly serviced by their own courier, the Defense Courier Service.

Q: Who would also take care of the diplomatic...

THOMPSON: Yes, but I think we went there about once a week, and they were there a little more frequently.

Q: Once a week from Bangkok.

THOMPSON: Yes.



Q: Okay. Any other differences of significance between working out of Frankfurt and working out of Bangkok? Or was it pretty similar types of patterns?

THOMPSON: Operationally, the patterns were similar, of course there were differences in the lifestyle. In Bangkok, you got your own housing on the economy and the embassy paid for it, and in Frankfurt you had government housing. Little things like that.

Q: And you probably didn't go behind the block countries like the way you did from Vienna, or did you? You weren't going into China yet.

THOMPSON: No, not yet. Although we started going in there pretty quick during my tour there. No, we didn't. We'd go as far south as New Zealand, Fiji, and as far north as Hong Kong, and we'd go out to India and Pakistan of course, Afghanistan, Nepal.

Q: Did you go to a place like Dacca in East Pakistan before Bangladesh became independent or was that pattern within Pakistan by the embassy? I guess I'm wondering about consulates under the supervision of an embassy. Were they handled differently than embassies?

THOMPSON: In general, the consulates are the responsibility of the embassy, but in the case of Dacca, obviously it was so far apart that we went there. The same thing with Hong Kong, you can't say that the United Kingdom should send a special courier out to Hong Kong because it happens to belong to the United Kingdom. [laughter]

Q: [laughter] Well, Hong Kong has always been a very different kind of place. So you would go to Dacca...

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Any other differences in terms of the operations? You would use American carriers whenever you could.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: But also Asian airlines, I suppose to a significant extent.

THOMPSON: Yes, it mainly Asian airlines, mostly Thai International because we negotiated a favorable air cargo rate with them.

Q: Why was the office moved from Manila to Bangkok? That was before your time.

THOMPSON: It's still a question of some controversy. Some of my colleagues still say that that was a mistake because we did have the DCS station right there and we had to go down and pick up the stuff. But they just felt that there was also a DCS station in Bangkok and it seemed to be more central with more airlines transiting Bangkok and it seemed to be the most cost-efficient place for us to live, for us to be stationed.

Q: How long were you in Bangkok during this time?

THOMPSON: Two and a half years.

Q: And then you came back to Frankfurt?

THOMPSON: No, I went to Washington because I married a foreign national, and in those days you were obliged to go to Washington so that the wife could get U.S. citizenship.

Q: And you were based here in Washington for a couple of years?

THOMPSON: Yes, for two years.

Q: Still as a traveling diplomatic courier?

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: And you did what, South America, Central America?

THOMPSON: South America and certain parts of West Africa. At a certain point, the West African operation broke away from the Frankfurt office and became part of the Washington office.

Q: Pan Am was still servicing, so you would use that trunk route as you described along the coast.



THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: And that time there was not an office in Miami or Fort Lauderdale.

THOMPSON: No, we didn't have all of these hubs as we do now. We just had three offices. That lasted all the way up until the 1990s.

Q: But from Washington, going to Latin America, you would do it either out of New York or Miami, from Washington...

THOMPSON: In those days we didn't even have an office in Miami. But we did have a large vault there in the post office to store our material. So we would always leave from here.

Q: Yes, but a lot of the flights, you had to go to Miami to pick them up of course.

THOMPSON: Yes, especially the ones to the Caribbean.

Q: And you covered all of the Caribbean, South America, Central America?

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Again, was there anything different than Asia or Europe? You were traveling more on American carriers, I suppose.

THOMPSON: Yes, we used Braniff to a great extent, and we had what amounted to a hub in Panama. We even had an apartment there. Instead of using a hotel, we just had an apartment where we lived. And we would shuttle in and out of Panama, using Braniff as our trunk line.

Q: And at the end of your Washington assignment, you went back to Frankfurt?

THOMPSON: I went back to Bangkok.

Q: Again as a traveling diplomatic courier.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: This would have been about 1974?

THOMPSON: Yes. So I went back to Bangkok. I had a total of four tours there, and this was my second tour.

Q: That was where you were the most, and in Frankfurt you were there twice?

THOMPSON: Twice.

Q: Four times in Bangkok. And this time, in the mid-'70s the Vietnam war was winding down or ending...

THOMPSON: It was winding down and I think I was the last courier to go in there.

Q: Into Saigon?

THOMPSON: Into Saigon. Yes. And also into Phnom Penh. I was the last, if not the last then certainly one of the last two to go in before it fell as well.

Q: Were either or both of those trips difficult for you to accomplish?

THOMPSON: No. It was a little bit stressful, because in Phnom Penh we had to circle in ever smaller circles to get down instead of flying straight down because the city was completely surrounded in those days at the last. But no, it wasn't difficult.

Q: You were on a commercial airline.

THOMPSON: Yes, it was Air Vietnam and I believe it was Thai International going to Cambodia.

Q: Okay. Those were just basically airport transfers I suppose and then you went right out on the same plane?



THOMPSON: No, if the plane went out, then we would have an airport exchange. I recall that the last two times that I went to Phnom Penh and Saigon I overnighted there.

Q: Because the plane left presumably the next day.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Anything else about this second assignment in Bangkok?

THOMPSON: We interfaced with the Australian and New Zealand military to a great extent. We carried material down to Melbourne, Australia and handed it over to the Australians almost directly. We signed it over to a pouch clerk and in the same car he handed it over to the Australians. That was the first time that I experienced that.

Q: Did we do the same thing with the British? No.

THOMPSON: Well we might have, but I didn't actually see it. There was a cooperative military agreement where we actually carried classified material for them.

Q: And we would do the same for them. They would do it for us...

THOMPSON: No, to my knowledge, they never did it for us. We only carried our own material, but we carried things for them.

Q: Carried things for them and handed things over to them when we had gotten to the destination. So that was presumably that was arranged at higher levels, government to government.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: And then you would make sure that the person receiving it was the correct person and then that was it.

THOMPSON: Well, I would just sign it over to the Americans, and he would open the pouch and give it to the Australians. It was very interesting.

Q: And we would be kind of bringing material worldwide for them to Melbourne that they could pick up in various places?

THOMPSON: I don't know. This was just some kind of a special military intelligence material. What I'm telling you isn't classified because it was openly done.

Q: But you still had to go to Melbourne, to Australia, to Wellington, to somewhere in New Zealand?

THOMPSON: Yes, except that normally we didn't go to these consulates. Of course we had to go to Sidney because that was where the plane landed, and so we used that as kind of a central point. But normally we didn't go to consulates. But we did in this case just to move this material.

Q: Because of that special requirement.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: After Bangkok, in about 1977, you went back to Frankfurt. To do the same thing that you had done before?

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Any new circumstances or situation that was different than the previous time?

THOMPSON: During that period we gradually stopped having paired trips to the eastern countries. It started I believe with Yugoslavia. We started going there alone. And then for reasons of security and budgetary restraints, we stopped going on paired trips to every eastern country except to Moscow. And then finally that ended as well, but that ended later in the '80s and '90s.

Q: You continued to do all of these trips on aircraft.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Still in Eastern Europe on Austrian Airlines.



THOMPSON: Yes, but that was a gradual change as well. As Lufthansa started to turn around shuttle flights to these various European capitals, we started using Lufthansa out of Frankfurt.

Q: And then American carriers started going to Moscow, didn't they?

THOMPSON: Yes, but not from Frankfurt. They were coming from here.

Q: Directly from New York.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: What else in this period? You were there for five years in Frankfurt.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: What else happened in that period? I remember you came to Cyprus when I was there.

THOMPSON: [laughter] No, I just continued to carry the bags. You mean what happened as far as our organization, I suppose. The trips changed from time to time depending on the airline schedules and the whims of the posts.

Q: One significant change that must have affected you in terms of the previous pattern was that Beirut was not as available. Civil war had started there in about 1975, I think. You were there in Frankfurt in early 1977. What difference did that make in terms of the Middle East?

THOMPSON: It meant that we started to use Athens more as a base, and that was convenient too because we had a Defense Courier Service station right off the Athens airbase.

Q: The Air Force base. But you did not actually have couriers based in Athens?

THOMPSON: No.

Q: But that was a staging area?

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: But I do remember that you came to Cyprus, maybe several times while I was there, at least once. But I don't remember why you would have come to Cyprus... to serve the embassy in Nicosia as opposed to using that as a dropping off point, there were flights from Larnaca to places like Baghdad and Damascus.

I was testing your memory a little bit about what kind of shuttles you did out of Larnaca in Cyprus because I was there at the time and I remember we had a nice get-together one time. We had known each other, I guess it doesn't hurt to mention back in Occidental College back in 1956-57. It was good to see you there, Dick. I was wondering if you could remember whether Larnaca, Cyprus had in some way come to replace Beirut Airport a little bit?

THOMPSON: Yes, it had, and for a period of time we made shuttles out of there to Cairo, to Damascus, perhaps to Amman, I'm not sure but we maintained a large presence there, we had as you recall a pretty good sized vault. We would shuttle in and out of Nicosia for some time. This was sort of a sub-hub of the Athens hub.

Q: As I recall, all the places you mentioned were certainly very accessible from Larnaca airport at the time. Baghdad, also, I think we would have had an embassy there in this period. I'm not sure about Tehran.

THOMPSON: We used Cyprus Airlines and they were perfect for us because they would go and come back... oh Tel Aviv, we went to Tel Aviv as well from Nicosia on a shuttle.

Q: Anything else about your traveling diplomatic courier experience in Frankfurt from '77 to '82. You went all over Africa, still?

THOMPSON: East Africa. We continued to go to East Africa.

Q: Because West Africa was covered from Manila?

THOMPSON: Yes. Of course the mechanics changed, the trips changed because of geopolitical changes. For example, we used Asmara, Eritrea, Ethiopia as a base in the 60s and that changed when there was a change of government there and there was no more airbase at Asmara. And in fact, we didn't even go into Addis Ababa for some time. So that changed the operations a little bit, but we continued to travel.



Q: In 1982, you moved from Frankfurt back to Bangkok again. This time your third time. You were still a traveling courier.

THOMPSON: Yes. That was my last tour as a traveling courier.

Q: Anything else special about that time? This was '82-'85.

THOMPSON: Yes, by that time we were well established in our trips to China. When we started going to China, we went the same way that Henry Kissinger went, I think, that is through Pakistan, on PIA. But when I went back during that third tour, we were going to Tokyo. The material would arrive at the airbase and we would take it into Beijing on Japan airlines.

Q: So you'd have to get it from the airbase outside of Tokyo to Japan Airlines.

THOMPSON: Yes, we would go and get it and store it in the embassy and they would take us out to the airport. This is before Narita, we would see the airport closer to Tokyo.

Q: Haneda, I believe.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Before we go on to more managerial roles that I think you played from then on, let's talk a little bit in a general way about the traveling courier experience that you had. I guess one question that has to be asked is did you ever have any unexpected landings, or crashes, or significant problems with the aircraft? You were on an awful lot of airlines with varying maintenance records all over the world.

THOMPSON: No, I was fortunate, I never did have anything like that happen to me as far as the planes. Of course, we were diverted from time to time because of weather or something would happen to the plane, but never any crashes.

Q: Did you travel on Ethiopian Airlines all over Africa?

THOMPSON: Yes, and back in the 60s that was our main trunk all the way down to Nairobi from Frankfurt.

Q: I can remember in Ghana in West Africa that Ethiopian Airlines came in and it was the only airline that you could take across from East Africa to West Africa. I don't remember whether the couriers took it. Seems to me they did.

THOMPSON: That could be. When you were there...

Q: Pan American wasn't operating any more.

THOMPSON: And Ethiopian Airlines was a very well-managed operation in those days. I believe they were trained by Trans World Airlines (TWA). They had an affiliation with TWA. The cabin service and the air cargo service, the entire operation was very supportive.

Q: East African Airlines doesn't exist any more, but I think it operated a fairly wide network in the '60s.

THOMPSON: Yes, and we used them throughout operating out of Nairobi to a great extent. At a certain point, it broke up because there was some political differences between Tanzania and Kenya but before that we used them extensively.

Q: I have to ask you about another airline that I had some experience with that I think was also well managed and supervised and advised by American airlines, I think Pan American... that's Ariana, the Afghan Airlines. Did you use that sometimes?

THOMPSON: Yes, a couple of times, but not too often. When we went to Kabul, it was usually on Indian Airlines from New Delhi.

Q: Did you save passports? Your passports must have been full of stamps.

THOMPSON: I have. Yes. Not just full of stamps, but we had addendums stuffed in there that would make them several inches thick.

Q: And did you keep a diary of your trips?

THOMPSON: No. I wish I had. My parents have the letters that I wrote, but that's the only memory I have.



Q: Any other important or significant adventures that you had? You didn't crash... that's great [laughter] for you, and I think you had really good fortune in that respect. But, any other adventures you had?

THOMPSON: In February of '66, I arrived in Accra, Ghana the morning of the coup, on Royal Dutch Airlines (KLM), and I ended up spending a week there.

Q: Stuck.

THOMPSON: Stuck there. There was no danger. There was a little bit of stress at the beginning, but as happened in those days, no one from the embassy came up to meet me because that was standard procedure. The driver would meet you. So when I found out that I wouldn't be able to continue on my trip, I got a hold of my pouches. Unfortunately, my suitcase was still on the plane. And all the passengers got off the plane. And my suitcase took off with the pilot and crew. I didn't see it again for a week, so all I had were the clothes on my back. So the people in the embassy were very good. They came out and picked us up and we got through the roadblocks and they took us to a hotel. Later on I stayed with some communicators until we finally got out of there.

The other thing that happened was, in the Mideast War, in the Six Day War, I was in Sanaa, Yemen when that broke out. I was at the airport with a young FSO named David Newton seeing me off and someone came up and said something to him, and he came back to me and said we are not going, you are not getting on the plane. The flight is cancelled. The Israelis have bombed Cairo. So I went back to the embassy and there were five of us there. They had already evacuated most of the staff. It was just the chargé ½ and a communicator and a few others.

Q: David Newton.

THOMPSON: David Newton. So we were in the embassy and a crowd came up around and started throwing stones and shouting. So we started to destroy everything, to burn everything. They had the old fashioned burn, which was just like a barbecue spit out in the yard, but the crowd was out there. The local police managed to push back the crowd, so we would run out and throw a bunch of papers into this thing and one person would turn it around and light the fire and burn it. When the crowd came closer we would go back in and then we would run out. In the meantime, the people from the intelligence agencies were destroying the machines in the embassy itself.



So we were stuck there for about six days. There were no flights going in or out. They finally negotiated a charter plane which was a DC-6 from, I believe, Ethiopian Airlines. We packed everything that we could find. I know more about some of these people than they would want me to know because I had to go into their homes and pack things for them. We put as much of the stuff as we could into these boxes and put the boxes on the plane and took off and landed in Asmara. It was an exciting experience. I was very impressed with the professional way everyone handled everything. Of course, David Newton, I never saw him again, but I followed his career throughout until he became ambassador to several countries.

Q: I think he has done an oral history interview. He was in Iraq not too long before the invasion of Kuwait among other assignments. Did he go back to Yemen?

THOMPSON: I think so, but what I remember most about Mr. Newton is that he was ambassador to Syria. It was so difficult for us to go into Syria in those days because they refused to let the diplomatic couriers deliver their pouches. They insisted in opening and X-raying the bags. It was a hostile situation. Very strong. The only person that they would recognize was the ambassador himself. Every week he actually went out and made a pouch exchange. And I thought that was remarkable that he would go out and do that. He volunteered to do this. He went out and met the courier and made the pouch exchange and signed for it and took it back in. Every week. But then when I thought back about the way he handled himself back in Yemen I thought this was something that he would do. He was a man of great integrity and a very sincere person. I liked him a lot.

Q: Anything else? Lessons learned or experiences that ought to be recorded about your traveling career, which lasted about almost 20 years.

THOMPSON: About 20 years. It's a very humbling experience to have this job because you realize how little you know. I learned a lot and you realize that there's more out there than you could possibly learn. I've always been a reader of books and I was able to read many books during this period. But I was never able to read serious books on an airplane or in an airport, maybe in a hotel room, but I had to read light stuff. Sometimes there was nothing else to do. That was in the days before Cable News Network (CNN), and sometimes you were stuck in these hotels and so sometimes I read several books a day. So it was a wonderful opportunity for me. I don't know anyone who read as much as I did.

Q: You had lots of opportunity on planes and the airports and hotels. THOMPSON: The worst situation was when I would run out of books.



Q: But you tried hard to avoid that, thinking about at least about that before you would embark on one of these trips.

THOMPSON: Before I would go on one of these trips, I would think, "this is a five-book trip" or a six-book trip or a ten-book trip. I would go to the library in Frankfurt or go buy books and fill my suitcase with them.

Q: Were you expected to stay awake on planes, or not necessarily... you could doze...

THOMPSON: No, you could sleep.

Q: Because you would wake up quickly when you landed or if there was any need to do anything. Because the pouches were generally in the hold under your supervision but not on your person.

THOMPSON: That's right, except in the case of when we were on paired trips and the material was in the cabin, then the rule was that one of the pair could sleep and the other had to stay awake.

Q: In about 1985, you came back from your third tour in Bangkok to Washington and what did you do in Washington?

THOMPSON: I was promoted to FP-3. I was working in the office during my third tour in Bangkok, and as a consequence I was promoted to FP-3, which is sort of a middle position. You can continue to be a traveling courier or you can go to work in the office. They encouraged me to work in the office. So I returned to Washington and I was in charge of the West African desk for the Washington regional diplomatic career office.

Q: And in that capacity, what sort of things would you do? Other than supervising the traveling couriers in West Africa? You would make up their schedules or deal with problems as they arose?



THOMPSON: Yes, I would make up their schedules and before they went on their trip I would brief them and when they came back I would debrief them about the trip. I would change the briefing sheet accordingly and change the schedules. There were always special circumstances almost every day. I would send a telegram about a heavy load or an unusual situation. I had to make sure that all of the couriers who were going on my trips were properly visaed, and that could be a problem because sometimes they would not give visas for the proper length of time and you had to send them back to get them renewed. Generally just making up the schedule board and assigning the couriers. All of the normal administrative functions that a manager has... sick leave, annual leave, things like that.

Q: And you would provide liaisons with other parts of the State Department and other parts of the U.S. government as necessary?

THOMPSON: Not at that level. I was just a desk officer at that time.

Q: But you were no longer traveling yourself.

THOMPSON: No. What we usually did in the courier service was each desk officer would take a trip at least once a year, whatever trips he was in charge of, he would take that trip at least once a year.

Q: And act as a courier.

THOMPSON: Yes, as a courier. So that you understood exactly what was happening. You could hardly brief someone to do a job that you didn't know yourself. And the conditions always changed, so it was important to take these survey trips and you could meet people who were there with the security officers and the communications officers.

Q: Was the courier service still under the Office of Communications, or had it switched to Diplomatic Security? When did that actually happen?

THOMPSON: I believe it was either 1983 or 1984 before the Inman Panel was convened. One of the recommendations of the Inman Panel was that the courier service be moved to the new Bureau of Diplomatic Security and out of the Office of Communications, which later became the Office of Information Management.

Q: So that affected you when you came back to Washington. You were not part of...



THOMPSON: Yes, we became part of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security.

Q: Was that a significant change...

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: For you? Or did it not matter all that much for you as you were newly arrived?

THOMPSON: It was a significant change for all of us in the sense that we had more promotion opportunities. As a result of the report of the Inman Panel, the Bureau of Diplomatic Security was given increased funding and scope. So we were able to get more senior positions. We even got a senior Foreign Service position, an OC position. And as a result of that I was able to get promoted fairly fast. There simply were more openings. They created four FP-1 positions. Each of the regional officers was a 1 position, and the deputy director was a 1 position.

Q: In terms of the work of the diplomatic courier service, it didn't change that much? And also did it mean that newly-hired security officers under the Inman program, there was a quite an influx of junior diplomatic security officers, did they begin coming into the courier service to work initially, or did that happen later.

THOMPSON: Initially, in the late 80s, we had an influx of many new security officers who came in on excursion tours as diplomatic couriers. We had one class, I think, that was almost totally security officers, because at the time we weren't hiring diplomatic couriers from the outside. So we had these young, mostly men, who came in for two or three years as diplomatic couriers. Some of these same people went out and became security officers and then came back as couriers years later and the head of the Bangkok office now and the deputy director were security officers who came in as couriers on excursion tours back in the 80s.

Q: So they liked the diplomatic courier experience.

THOMPSON: Very much. I think they may have recognized that their opportunities for advancement at least in those days were much faster in the courier service than they would have been as security officers.



Q: The reasons for having these excursion tours as diplomatic couriers was I suppose several. One was that then the State Department could use these people rather than hiring from the outside at a time when maybe that would have taken longer or was more difficult. I assume also that it was a kind of experience for a security officer that was beneficial and of course they were very aware of security situations, so it really was a security function in some ways.

THOMPSON: Yes. I think they used the term 'cross fertilization'. It was a way that the department saw to give the new security officers an opportunity to see how another part of that bureau worked. It was also a practical matter of the courier service not being able to hire from the outside at the time. By the way, when we were in the office of communications, we also got several communicators in the courier service. The present director of the courier service was a communicator back in the 60s.

Q: Did it work the other way, that couriers could sometimes work as communicators in embassies or later on as security officers? Or was it pretty much into the diplomatic courier service?

THOMPSON: That's happened, but it's very rare. It's happened to a few couriers that I can think of who became security officers.

Q: And others became, as you said before, Foreign Service officers, consular officers, and so on.

THOMPSON: And a few became communicators. I can think of a few who became communicators.

Q: I would think that, and this goes back to your traveling courier days, this question... but it must have been that travel could be exciting and interesting, sometimes tedious, often tedious, but it could also be demanding, particularly if you had a family, to constantly be on the go.

THOMPSON: Yes, that's a question that we would get many times, and it's true. It depended on your situation. My wife never knew any other life. When I met her I was a diplomatic courier. Some wives say that they were able to have their husbands for three or four or five days all day long, instead of just coming home tired at night. And they preferred that. I've also heard some of my colleagues say that because they were couriers, it saved their marriage. [laughter]

Q: [laughter] Pluses and minuses.



THOMPSON: And I had one colleague say that his marriage lasted five years longer, because he was a courier, than it would have been.

Q: Anything else in this initial managerial, I suppose supervisory, experience as a desk officer in the Washington office?

THOMPSON: I was a desk officer in the beginning, and then I became the number two man in that particular office. It was an opportunity for me to deal with all the different kinds of personalities that we have in the courier service. We have people with masters degrees and we have high school dropouts. People who got their high school equivalency in the military. We had people in their 60s and people in their 20s. Men and women from all different backgrounds. It was not an easy job to manage these people because you had to adjust your outlook with everyone who walked in the door. I think that would probably be more difficult in the courier service than in some of the other parts of the State Department where there's a more homogeneous background.

Q: Can you generalize, without speaking of specific people, and talk a little bit about the attributes or characteristics from your supervisory point of view of careers who were particularly effective and worked well and were less of a problem in terms of managing them? Is there anything that one can say in general? Obviously their backgrounds differed, but I mean like patience, flexibility, things like that that made a good courier.

THOMPSON: Yes. I think that the most important thing was flexibility and the ability to get along in a constantly changing foreign environment. And just as the couriers came from all different backgrounds, the couriers themselves had to deal with people from all sorts of backgrounds. You had to deal with porters and you had to deal with high-ranking officials, both in the embassy and in the countries themselves. So you had to change your approach as well in doing it. So you can't just have someone who can get down and work with a porter or an embassy driver and not be able to talk to a Foreign Service Officer (FSO). You had to have someone who could handle the full gamut of different types of people.

Q: I can see that these would be very important elements and certainly flexibility and adaptability would be important. On the other hand, there has to be a certain discipline and following rules and knowing what's required, what's essential, where you can't bend. Is that a fair statement?



THOMPSON: Yes. That's absolutely correct. First of all, the inviolability of the pouch is absolute. But we never had any problems with that. You have to be firm in certain circumstances, but you have to develop a feeling for when to be firm and when not to be firm. It's something that you learn as you go along. It's not something that you have intuitively.

Q: In this period of the mid-'80s, what kind of training was done for new couriers?

THOMPSON: At that time we started the formal training it wasn't just the informal training where you mostly went out with a senior courier. We actually had a lesson plan, we had professional trainers, we even had professional trainers to train the trainers. We worked out of Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and also out of the office at Dunn Loring. We had a lesson plan, we were called in to teach, I taught several classes and we had professional trainers monitor our classes and offer suggestions about how we would teach. Instead of just getting up there and telling war stories, we had the use of audio-visual equipment. It was much more effective and professional. We tested students at the end. This was all as the result, I believe, of our transfer to the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, which is a much more professional organization, and they had much more money too, more funding.

Q: I would think in the Office of Communications, I don't want to say you were a stepchild, but you were a little bit off their... I suppose their main focus was on telecommunications in various forms, and for years the telegraph, whereas the pouch, the diplomatic courier were a little bit separate from the mainstream of the office, from the bureau... is that right?

THOMPSON: That's right. But you could argue that the Office of Communications is closer than the Bureau of Diplomatic Security because at least they made up the pouches. They sent the telegrams, they made the hotel reservations, and there was a big conflict when we switched over, in the individual embassies, between the security officer, the Regional Security Officer (RSO), and the Information Management Officer. In many of the embassies, they would ask us to referee disputes between these two people as to who would meet us, how we would work it out, between who would... neither of them really wanted anything to do with us, and when we went to the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, many in the Office of Communications saw this as an opportunity to concentrate on what they thought was their main job. So we would receive telegrams asking us, who is responsible for this, what do we do, who is supposed to meet the courier, who is supposed to send the telegrams, who is supposed to make the hotel reservations. And it was my experience when I got into more a senior level, that the posts which sent these types of telegrams were posts in which there was a weak admin officer. Most of the strong admin officers would simply call the man and say, ok you are going to do this and you are going to do this and that's it. When there was a weak admin officer he would send a telegram off to Washington trying to get us to resolve a dispute from something that was happening three or four thousand miles away.



Q: Did you have any general feeling about whether it should be the responsibility of the regional security officer or the communications or information management unit at a post?

THOMPSON: I always felt that since we were part of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, it would be the RSO that would have the responsibility. Obviously, the telegrams would have to be sent from the communicator, and the communicator makes up the pouches. The question of the peripheral things as to who meets the courier have to be decided at the local level. Our official line was, whoever meets the courier, it should be the people who use the pouch. In other words, what we wanted them to do was to draw up some kind of a roster, and have whoever uses the pouch go out here once a week or once a month, send a representative out there to meet the courier for this escort duty.

Q: But perhaps have the responsibility rotate.

THOMPSON: Yes, exactly.

Q: Set up a schedule.

THOMPSON: That way it would rotate. But what you found was many times some of these senior officers would be busy and they would end up with the communicator going out there anyway. That was one of their complaints.

Q: You mentioned that during this time in Washington you were promoted and moved up to be deputy director of this office. This office was responsible for backstopping for all of the...

THOMPSON: No, this was deputy chief of the Washington office.

Q: Deputy chief of the Washington office.

THOMPSON: Yes. We had the director and the deputy director, that was a separate organization from the regional office. Both physically and obviously, it was part of the chain of command, but it was separate.

Q: So you as deputy chief of the Washington regional office would be in effect on the same level as the deputy chief of the Frankfurt office or the Bangkok office.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Responsible for the operations, if you will, out of Washington.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Okay. Which primarily involved South America and West Africa and the Caribbean.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Anything else about that assignment?

THOMPSON: No. It was my first experience working as a manager and it was quite enlightening. The bureau and did give me some management training. I don't know whether it took or not, but mostly it's just going by your instincts, I think.

Q: Did you miss the travel, or did you still have plenty of opportunity for travel in this capacity?

THOMPSON: I missed it very much. Although by then I realized I had a family and I like to be home and just love to travel, even now. It's a wonderful job.

Q: You never got sick of it or full of it.

THOMPSON: No. Never got tired of it.

Q: Well, where did you go after that? Or did we fully cover the Washington assignment?

THOMPSON: Yes, I was the chief of the Bangkok regional courier office.

Q: Okay. And in that capacity you were responsible for all of the operations out of Bangkok.

THOMPSON: Yes.



Q: This is your fourth assignment to Bangkok.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: You went there in '01?

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: And what were the main things that you did in that period?

THOMPSON: This was my first experience as actually being in charge of an office. Although it was our smallest office, only 14 traveling couriers, I was in charge of all of the operations out of that office. At that time we went all the way up to Japan and all the way to Fiji and India and Pakistan. We also went to Beijing.

Q: Where did you intersect at that time with the European network?

THOMPSON: In the beginning, we used the DCS system out of Kadena in Okinawa. They would bring the material down to us and then later we found that this wasn't reliable. So we established a trunk line using Finnair to Helsinki. The material would come from New York and we had a very large secure warehouse in Helsinki that was being used for the Moscow project anyway, so we simply stored our material there and then took a direct flight from Helsinki to Bangkok once a week.

Q: Was that a nonstop?

THOMPSON: Yes. And they gave us a very good air cargo rate, which was very important.

Q: Now, who would negotiate rates like that, that you say is a fair cargo rate? Would somebody in Helsinki do that? Or would you do that in Bangkok?

THOMPSON: In this case it was done in Washington, but that was one of my responsibilities to negotiate these special rates. With Thai International, which was our main carrier out of Bangkok, it was a very interesting experience, dealing with these top airline executives and persuading them either to give us a favorable air cargo rate or to give us a break on the prices of tickets and certain support that we would need. It was sort of a package deal that we had to negotiate from time to time.



Q: Did you usually to do it for a one year contract, or longer?

THOMPSON: Yes, quite often it was informal. When I was in Bangkok, my biggest crisis that I experienced, the Department took away our ability to fly first class. So we had to fly business class, which wasn't bad at all, because we could still get out of the plane first from business class. The problem was, all of our favorable cargo rates and favorable fares from Thai International were based on the use of first class. When we went down to business class, and the senior executives found out about it, they threatened to stop all of this favorable treatment. For example, they squeezed us at the airport and would not allow us to go out on the tarmac any more. All of these things that were involved in this, plus the cultural problems. So I had to negotiate this in this crisis situation. It just happened almost from one day to the next that the Department stopped the first class travel and put us in business class. Thai International said, okay no more deals. It would have ended up costing the U.S. government more than it would have cost us to fly first class if we had done what they wanted us to do. But I was able to deal with it through a combination of enlisting the support of the political officer and the ambassador in the embassy, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) representative and a host of other people to persuade them that it was in their best interest for us to continue to have this favorable treatment. Because I had the ability to change to other airlines. Not on all the trips, but in certain trips, for example down to Australia I could have easily switched to Qantas. And that was my biggest challenge in my time as the chief of the Bangkok office.

Q: And you were satisfied with the arrangement that you were able to work out to deal with these issues to fly business class?

THOMPSON: Yes. It worked out very well. By the way, I found out later that my colleagues in Washington had a very difficult time persuading the department to let us fly business class. The department wanted us to fly cabin class, but they were able to persuade them...

Q: Your traveling couriers at the time, were they upset about having to switch from first class to something less?

THOMPSON: Very much so, especially some of the senior people. The senior couriers, they felt like we had let them down. They complained bitterly that they couldn't be up in first class any more. Of course, as it turned out, many of the aircraft were configured such that they didn't even have first class anymore. All they had was business and cabin class anyway. Many of the Thai International flights just stopped first class completely.



Q: Or, there wasn't really much distinction between first class and business class.

THOMPSON: No, not really.

Q: Why don't you talk a little bit more about your status within the mission, within the embassy in Bangkok. Who did you report to? You say you got good cooperation and help from the political officer and the ambassador in this problem with Thai International. But how did you relate generally to other parts of the embassy. Did you report to the security officer?

THOMPSON: No, my efficiency report was written by the deputy director of the courier service back here in Washington and reviewed by staff, by his deputy assistant secretary.

Q: In the Bureau of Diplomatic Security.

THOMPSON: Yes. We were semi-independent. I had a very good relationship with all of the people in the embassy, particularly the admin officer. They were very supportive of us. Perhaps it was because at least in those days we had deep pockets, and when we needed more vehicles, for example, we were able to buy them, and of course they used these vehicles for other purposes when they weren't supporting couriers. It was an independent organization like so many of the other organizations that were attached to the embassy there.

Q: And you were very much a regional office. You just happened to be located there for reasons that you talked about before, but didn't have a lot to do with Thailand as such. That was where you were based, and obviously you had to deal with the Thai customs and the airline, and so on, but otherwise you could have been somewhere else.

THOMPSON: Yes. I could have. It could have been Manila, it could have been anywhere. We just happened to be there. From time to time, posts of certain admin officers have been uncomfortable having these regional officers within their jurisdiction, but they were very supportive of the courier service there.

Q: The embassy in Bangkok is very large.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: It certainly was when you were there. Still is.



THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: You had rental housing on the market, or did you have embassy housing?

THOMPSON: It was embassy housing but there were other nationalities in the same building. It wasn't a separate building as such.

Q: So, one apartment or several or rented or even owned by the embassy.

THOMPSON: That's right. And some of the apartment buildings were taken by the embassy people. I was there for four tours and every time I went there the housing got better. It was good at the beginning. It was wonderful. That particular tour, I'd never stayed in a nicer place except my own home here.

Q: Anything else about this first managerial experience? It sounds like it was a good job to have. How long were you in Bangkok this time?

THOMPSON: Three years. I guess the thing that impressed me the most was my access to some of the higher levels of the embassy. This was the first time that I was actually a diplomat. I was actually on the diplomatic list. I had a diplomatic license plate. As such, I would go to the country team meeting every week, and I'm kind of a current events junkie and I would read in the Bangkok Post all of these things that were happening in Thailand. We had coups and all kinds of things going on. Very interesting. And then I would go into these meetings and listen to the analysis between the political officer and the deputy chief of mission (DCM) and the ambassador. It was just fascinating to me and I wouldn't miss a meeting simply because I enjoyed that so much of what I would read in the paper and then what they would say was happening. That was one of the highlights because it was very intellectually challenging for me to try and understand the machinations of all these little things that were going on in that country.

Q: Did those things affect your operations directly? It really didn't, did it?

THOMPSON: No, except a few times when there was a curfew of course, and then we had to arrange certain things when they had a coup d'etat, which they seemed to have every couple of years or every year. When there were riots and things like that, but other than that, no.



Q: Anything else during your time there in terms of the network that you had, the fourteen couriers. Everything went pretty routinely other than these various things that you talked about?

THOMPSON: Yes, I think it went very well.

Q: Did you travel around? Or you had done that before so you really didn't need to do it?

THOMPSON: No, I made sure that I took every trip. It was important for the regional diplomatic courier officer to take every trip. You can hardly tell someone about something if you hadn't done it yourself.

Q: And you continued to debrief the couriers after each trip?

THOMPSON: No, I had a deputy who did all of those things. I didn't do any of that unless he happened to be on vacation.

Q: Anything else?

THOMPSON: No.

Q: Dick, I think we've pretty well finished up with your assignment as the regional diplomatic courier officer in Bangkok.

THOMPSON: RDCO it's called.

Q: Okay... where you supervised the office in Bangkok. Fourteen diplomatic couriers, deputy chief. Anything else we ought to say about that assignment? To reiterate, that took place from about 1991 to 1994.

THOMPSON: Yes. No, I can't think of anything.

Q: Okay. Where did you go from there?

THOMPSON: I returned to the States, where I was assigned in the main office as Deputy Director.

Q: Deputy Director ...

THOMPSON: Of the courier service.

Q: Of the diplomatic courier service.

THOMPSON: Of the whole courier service.

Q: In the Bureau of Diplomatic Security. And in that capacity, you were not just concerned with the Washington regional diplomatic courier office, but the entire worldwide diplomatic courier service. So what sorts of things were you primarily involved with?

THOMPSON: I was involved with ... at that point I was no longer involved with operations. I became involved with policy, and to a very large extent with personnel problems, which surprised me.

Q: Personnel problems...

THOMPSON: Personnel situations.

Q: Which would be things like assignments to the diplomatic courier service positions, particularly the regional directors, deputy positions, retention, promotion perhaps. Is that right?

THOMPSON: That's correct. Assignments for all of the couriers all over the world, which is any place that is difficult and a potentially controversial situation. And promotions, I served on a promotion panel. And policy dealing with some of the issues as to overlapping responsibilities and jurisdiction. Not just between the regional offices, but between the various agencies in the U.S. government such as defense courier service and us.

Q: So you would try to work out problems with them, with your counterpart at the defense courier service, and perhaps with some other agencies as well.



THOMPSON: Yes, and it became very serious in certain ways, because at one point, for example, the defense courier service decided they wanted to charge us for moving our material. I became the chief negotiator in this situation and I wanted to be able to solve the problem without turning around and saying, well we'll charge you for what we carry for you too. That would not accomplish anything. We carry a lot of material for defense attachés and I didn't want to start doing that. But we were able to solve the problem in a way that didn't raise any voices.

Q: And didn't require any escalation to the Secretary of Defense or Secretary of State.

THOMPSON: No, just to the desk.

Q: So there was a deputy assistant secretary in the Bureau of Diplomatic Security solely involved with the diplomatic courier service, or did he or she have other responsibilities as well?

THOMPSON: He had other responsibilities. He had the engineers and several others, counter intelligence I believe he had.

Q: So the director of the diplomatic courier service was pretty autonomous in terms of managing the diplomatic courier service, unless a problem became so acute that it needed elevation to a higher level.

THOMPSON: Yes, the personnel problems, and they were very good about giving us a lot of leeway of handling these personnel problems and policy problems. Only when it became a matter of security did we usually go to them. The fact of the matter is that the job is so esoteric that most of them don't even understand what we do. This is probably true of a lot of organizations like ours, not that ours is so special, it's just very, very unusual with our rules and the things that we do.

Q: Now is the director of the diplomatic courier service who, presumably you worked for, also from, came up through the ranks as a courier as you did?

THOMPSON: Yes, we all did.

Q: So you sort of had a strong tradition and knowledge of what was involved. You hadn't just come into a managerial position without a lot of knowledge of what was going on.



THOMPSON: Yes we all worked our way up. We all started as privates.

Q: You talked about your relationship with other agencies, the Defense Department particularly and with the others in the Bureau of Diplomatic Security. How about other parts of the State Department, for example, the Bureau of Personnel, or the Foreign Service Institute? Did you have leeway in making your own assignments or did you have to take account of those entities as well?

THOMPSON: In making our assignments?

Q: Yes.

THOMPSON: The assignments were made by a committee of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security and we were just one vote. We would all get together, all of the chiefs, or the directors or deputy directors, and we would go down the list as presented by our personnel people and decide where each person would be assigned. When there were conflicts, almost always, the person who was in charge of that unit would get what he or she recommended.

Q: So you had a lot to say about assignments of the individual diplomatic couriers.

THOMPSON: Yes, and we would present the arguments, usually in a neutral way, and explain why we favored this person going there. Sometimes it was a practical matter having to do with filling a slot, and sometimes it was a personality situation. I guess that's true in all assignments.

Q: At this time, when you were in this senior position, was there a fair amount of excursion assignments both ways, in and out of the diplomatic courier service?

THOMPSON: Yes, we had several people coming in from many different organizations who were in many cases, quite frankly, they couldn't find a place for them. I suspect in a few cases they just wanted to get rid of people. So they put them in our organization. It made it a little bit difficult managing a few of these people, but we handled it.

Q: And were some of your couriers interested in taking, for whatever reasons, assignments elsewhere for an excursion for a limited time and then coming back to the courier service?



THOMPSON: Yes. And we had people go out and do jobs usually in the consular section. But some of them took General Service (GS) jobs, often for personal reasons having to do with their marriage or health, different reasons. They would go out and take excursion tours elsewhere.

Q: And I suppose in many cases it was not so much that they wanted a Washington assignment because you did have the Washington regional courier office. They wanted to be free of travel for a time.

THOMPSON: Yes, that's true. Some of them were just fed up with traveling and they couldn't find a job that they liked. Some of the younger couriers took the FSO exam and didn't pass and couldn't find a way to get in through some other way, so they would take excursion tours as officers in some place that was not very popular. A few of them were able to stay, and a few of them were pushed back on us.

Q: During this period, roughly from '94, the mid-90s, was the State Department hiring new diplomatic couriers?

THOMPSON: They were hiring new diplomatic couriers, but not enough to fill all of our slots. We were still understaffed.

Q: So you had to rely on...

THOMPSON: WAEs (retired employees hired back on contact, but paid only "when actually employed"). We had to rely to a great extent on WAEs.

Q: Retired employees being rehired.

THOMPSON: Yes, when actually employed. And at the beginning, we had a cadre of just five or six. Now we have about 40, I'm one. It worked out quite well that we were able to use these retired people.

Q: Were you using new diplomatic security officers as diplomatic couriers in this period or not?

THOMPSON: No, we stopped that. It was an administrative decision. I think that some of the senior people in the Bureau of Diplomatic Security decided that this was not a good career path and that the young security officers should go out and be security officers instead of, as they saw it, fooling around for a few years traveling around business class. So they put out the word that this is not really going to help your career a whole lot. Of course, we didn't like that very much because it sort of denigrated our organization, but it's a practical thing, I think.

Q: During this period as deputy director of the diplomatic courier service, did you serve sometimes for extended periods as the acting director, or was the director most of the time?

THOMPSON: Yes, I served a great deal of time as the acting director. To such an extent that I actually moved up into the office at the end, for the last nine months. I even had my name on the door, that I was actually the director, although officially I didn't have the slot.

Q: Anything special about that period? Did you enjoy that?

THOMPSON: Yes, I enjoyed it very much. It's a little difficult dealing with people who have been your friends for 30 years when you are in this position, but many of us encountered that. What happened during that period, when I was acting director, was that we had this...

Q: You could add this later on, you can insert something.



THOMPSON: Oh, okay, I'm trying to think of a name... It was Vice President Gore's Strategic Management Initiative, SMI, reinventing government. As part of his Strategic Management Initiative our assistant secretary, Tony Quainton, decided that we would cut down the frequency of courier service throughout the world. Sometimes we would cut down where we would have courier service twice a week, we would cut down to once every other week. It was an enormous, enormous slice. And so, as a consequence, we had to change everything around, all of our schedules, everything had to be changed around. So what we did, we sent individually tailored telegrams around to every post in the world, telling them what we intended to do and asking them if they had any input or any objections or any problems with it. We put in the telegram that this was from the highest level, Vice President Gore, that we were mandating this. And we got all of these telegrams back and we made up a series of hypothetical trips to accomplish this downsizing and it took several months. I was involved in meeting with very senior people. I chaired these meetings, explaining to them how this would affect them. Then, as a practical matter, I had to deal with the regional diplomatic courier officers who were afraid that they would not be able to handle such bulk because if you only go every other week instead of twice a week, you are going to have heavy loads, and you already have heavy loads to such an extent that sometimes it couldn't even get on these airplanes. So we had to establish a series of backup flights and new schedules for the courier service throughout the whole world as a result. So we downsized. We were able to eliminate jobs. We eliminated six jobs in our organization because of this, and we pulled it off quite well, I thought. Sometimes we had to charter planes. We didn't entirely agree with this because we could see that it was not really going to save a lot of money because we would simply have to move material other ways at more expense. But we accomplished this. Then about two years later, when they had the bombings in Nairobi, they decided to beef up the Bureau of Diplomatic Security again. These things go in cycles. So they decided they were going to increase the frequency of courier service. So, we had to start all over again and start hiring more people and increase the frequency, where before we were going once a week we would go twice a week to some places. So we had a complete switch. This happened throughout my career in government. You would see these things going on. The interesting thing was that some of the people who took credit for that first downsizing also took credit, these same individuals, also took credit when we increased the service, because they were increasing the efficiency in both cases.

Q: This sort of leads me to a very general kind of question. Obviously lots of things changed in diplomatic conduct affairs over the last 30 years, the Internet, the worldwide communication systems have changed. Reporting is not done by the pouch much any more, or if it is maybe it's unclassified pouches in some cases, sending newspapers back, and that sort of thing. Without getting into too many security-sensitive discussions, I guess there is still very much a need for the classified pouch. And for couriers to accompany it and escort it, make sure that it arrives safely. Is that right?



THOMPSON: I think so. Of course, we never got involved with what was in the pouch, but I think there is probably more need. You are correct that we don't send messages through the pouch any more, letters or even, that all goes telegraphically. But the machines themselves have to go by courier. And in some cases, we have extraordinary situations where whole embassies have to go by courier. For example, we had a very large operation in Moscow. For years, we sent in convoys of sealed trucks with all kinds of building materials accompanied by couriers. So the weight and the volume has actually increased over the years.

Q: And when we would accompany construction material couriers would accompany the trucks... they wouldn't drive the trucks, but they would be right there in the trucks?

THOMPSON: Yes. I was very much involved in that operation. During that time, we had the trucks in Helsinki and usually it was a convoy of ten trucks. There would be a courier at the beginning and at the middle and at the end. The end was a caboose, it was a RV, which we used, because going into Moscow there's nothing on the way, you can't stop at a McDonald's.

Q: So you could sleep in the vehicle...

THOMPSON: And go to the toilet and eat, and we would stop halfway in and park in the parking lot and several of us would walk around. The drivers were all finished. On each convoy, we had one Russian-speaking Army officer who had been trained in Russian to negotiate these things and it was an enormous, enormous operation.

Q: And you had radio contact.

THOMPSON: Yes, we had radios in every car. It was a very big operation. The material would come in by ship in a sealed container to Helsinki and put in a secure area. Then they would be brought over to the secure warehouse which is manned 24 hours a day by security American guards. Then we would take all of these trucks into Moscow and put them into a secure area. The trucks themselves were sealed. That was one of the more interesting things that I did. I actually negotiated the agreement with the Russians and the Finns for this transshipment together with someone from U.S. customs and one of our senior DS officers from the Office of Foreign Missions.

Q: So you did that negotiation when you were the deputy director?

THOMPSON: Yes, I went to Helsinki. We met the Russians at the border and spent several days talking to them, explaining what we wanted to do.



Q: And how you were going to do it.

THOMPSON: Yes, how we proposed to do it, and what we were doing, and they were very helpful.

Q: And all was arranged and took place, and you actually saw it transpire.

THOMPSON: Yes. I started it, and I saw it almost from the beginning to the end. It just ended about a year ago.

Q: To come back to the... you say the couriers don't know what the contents of the pouches are and aren't really involved in putting the pouches together. That's done either at an embassy or in Washington by somebody else. Would you be advised, though, in terms of air travel, that the pouch tomorrow is expected to be 1500 pounds so that you would know whether it could be accommodated on the aircraft and so on?

THOMPSON: Yes, almost every time there was an extraordinarily heavy load or an unusual load in terms of volume, the post would advise us so we could lock space. Is that what you mean?

Q: Yes, right. Because I would think that the courier himself, if he knew nothing about the pouch until he went to pick it up could be surprised sometimes.

THOMPSON: That's one of the responsibilities of the desk officer. When I was a desk officer I would go over to the pouch room almost every day and see what was there and then call it in to the airlines. Sometimes the airlines would say they can't take it, so then you had to decide whether to take a backup or to put another courier on board, that means to run another flight, or just leave the stuff there.

Q: Until the next time.

THOMPSON: Yes. I've had situations where we couldn't get all of the materials on board, and I would have various agencies call me up and say, look this is more important. This is really important, it should go first. And I always said, well I can't judge that. I can't referee these things, I don't know that your stuff is more important than someone else's. So, they'd come over and explain to me why theirs was top secret and it was urgent and all of these things, and I would just say, look, if you want to run a special, you can run a special. If you give a fund site, we can run a special and send a courier over there, but otherwise it's just first come, first served. I cannot decide, I cannot make a value judgment. I'm the courier officer. I cannot make a value judgment of what goes first.

Q: You mentioned the fund site for a courier run. Is that generally that the various agencies share the costs of the, reimburse the Defense Courier Service or I assume the various parts of the State Department are not charged.

THOMPSON: Yes, the various agencies give us funding every year. We are funded and staffed for a certain number of trips. If we are required to take special trips, then the agency that wants us to take those special trips in most cases has to provide a fund site for us if they want us to run a special trip.

Q: Anything else about what was a very interesting career? When did you retire?

THOMPSON: 1997.

Q: And that was at the end of this period of deputy director and acting director of the Defense Courier Service?

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Anything else?

THOMPSON: No. It was a wonderful job. It was an exciting job and I can't imagine doing anything else. I told you that I passed the FSO written exam in the 60s and failed the oral and I often thought about that and I think it was probably a good thing. I probably would have been selected out [laughter].



Q: [laughter] I don't know about that...you probably would have had some interesting... I've certainly learned from my own experience and from some of these interviews that Foreign Service careers involve lots of different things, including timing, luck if you will, being at the right place at the right time, makes such a difference. And if you're not there, then your career path takes a different turn. Seems to me that you had some really interesting experiences, twenty years or so of being a courier on the road and then another 15 years almost of being a supervisor, manager, and then rising to basically the highest level of the specialty.

THOMPSON: Yes, I'd have to say that the State Department treated me very well. I always got the assignments I requested. I was promoted every time when I became eligible, the first time. My housing was wonderful. I was treated very well and I have absolutely no complaints. I hear these stories of people, and of course I have a few minor little quibbles, but I hear these stories about people who complain so bitterly about the way they've been treated, but I've just been treated very well. Very happy with my whole career, and I have a very positive feeling towards the Department of State as a whole and the people who work for it.

Q: Well, that's probably a good sentiment to end on. But let me ask you one further question, since you retired in 1997 you say you've been a WAE on occasion. What sort of work have you been doing? You haven't been traveling as a courier.

THOMPSON: Oh, yes. I've been traveling. I went back to doing what I started out doing 35 years ago. I take courier trips. And the people that used to work for me I now work for them and it's a good thing that I treated them well. Also, I've been involved in recruitment, including the testing of new candidates, the oral testing and so on, very much. I even wrote the test for the candidates for diplomatic courier.

Q: And that's a written test or an oral test?

THOMPSON: No, the oral test. It's a scenario. You give them a question and then they answer and you have a series of backup questions.

Q: What sort of thing are you testing for? Are you looking for how they handle a particular situation, or for some of these characteristics we talked about before? Their flexibility and so on?



THOMPSON: Yes. They are hypothetical situations that you put them in. Of course, the test also involves questions about Americana, current events, and things like that, but the questions that I was involved with which were hypothetical situations: how you would react in a situation where there is a belligerent airline employee or a belligerent security officer at an airport. One of my favorite questions is something that actually happened to me and that is, when you sit down on these airplanes and you are sitting in business class, and someone somehow finds out what you do, the person sitting next to you finds out what you do and starts berating you about the fact that he's a taxpayer and what are you doing up in business class. And that's one of the hypothetical questions that I ask people, how would they respond to that, what would they say. And then if they give the proper answer then my follow-up question is, suppose this person accepts what you say and then starts complaining to you about the U.S. policy, some kind of diplomatic policy that they disagree with, how do you respond to that? And of course, the answer that we want is some kind of a level-headed, quiet answer in which you don't get involved in an argument. Some of the people who are applying say well I would defend the policy and tell this man that he's wrong. But we absolutely don't want someone like that, even though you might feel that way. In a situation like that, you absolutely don't want to get involved in an argument, especially not with a United States citizen.

Q: Do you expect people, in terms of the real situation that you mentioned, if somebody in conversation on the plane said, and what do you do or why are you flying to this next place, would you explain that you were a United States diplomatic courier?

THOMPSON: I found that as a practical matter it's not a good idea to do that unless they really they really press you. I would usually say well I work for the U.S. ... I wouldn't lie, I would say I work for the United States government. And they would say what do you do, and I would say well I work for the Department of State and then I would really try hard not to get involved with explaining what I do, because the inevitable questions come out, you know, is it strapped to your wrist, and are women trying to seduce you like they were in the movies and all those things like that.

Q: I didn't ask you that question. [laughter]

THOMPSON: [laughter]

Q: Let's just talk a little bit more about this entry process. The oral examination is given by people from the Defense Courier Service or by the Board of Examiners for the Foreign Service?



THOMPSON: It's given by the board of examiners. You are the subject matter expert, I believe it's called. And so one permanent person from the board of examiners who asks the questions about Americana and current events and things like that, and then you ask the hypothetical questions about the courier service.

Q: Because for diplomatic couriers, couriers are one of the Foreign Service specialties as opposed to the generalist officer procedures. And for specialties, various criteria are required but also they need to be examined in terms of their suitability and whatever the requirements are and that's what you would be involved in?

THOMPSON: Well, yes, and that's just part of the processing. They write an essay also, which we look over, and then a series of other tests that we give them.

Q: But there's no written examination for a pre-qualification in order to come to the oral...

THOMPSON: No.

Q: You looked at their application, their documents.

THOMPSON: No, there's no written examination but we look over their application to see that they meet the minimum qualifications.

Q: Which are no longer college education or age 31 or whatever...

THOMPSON: No, but there are certain experience qualifications that are required and you can substitute college for that. As a practical matter, even though you don't require a college education any more, it's so competitive that usually the college-educated people have an edge.

Q: You say that it's competitive in the sense that we're not hiring all that many, and there are lots of applicants.

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: Anything else we should talk about?

THOMPSON: No.



Q: Okay, well, I've enjoyed this and I congratulate you on your career. It's been very interesting for me to talk to you and I think you've done well and I appreciate your taking the time to do this.

THOMPSON: My pleasure.

End of interview